

1. This wheel’s on fire: New models for investigative journalism

COMMENTARY

In the following pages of *Pacific Journalism Review*, the journal is publishing transcripts of Center for Investigative Journalism director Robert Rosenthal’s keynote address at the ‘Back to the Source’ investigative journalism conference in Sydney in September 2010; conference sessions in which Sue Spencer, Richard Baker and Nick McKenzie talk about their work on the Secrecy story; and Linton Besser and Dylan Welch of the *Sydney Morning Herald* describe their investigations of the New South Wales Crime Commission. Many other sessions featured at the conference; but these two transcripts give a strong sense of some of the new possibilities for investigative journalism, and of how investigative journalists practise their craft.

Keywords: collaborative journalism, investigative journalism, media technologies

It is often said that journalism is the first rough draft of history; by contrast, investigative journalism provides the first rough draft of legislation. (de Burgh, 2000, p. 3)

HUGO DE BURGH is a former investigative journalist with BBC-TV and Channel 4, and now professor of journalism at Westminster University, where he is director of the China Media Centre. In other words, he is a media practitioner who now works in the academy—and the above definition, which opens the first edition of his book *Investigative Journalism: Context and Practice*, seems to me to encapsulate what investigative journalism at its best is all about. Investigative journalists may seek to expose injustice, hold the powerful to account, right wrongs, and give a voice

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to those who have no power and no influence; but ultimately the test of our work is whether or it is able, directly or indirectly, to bring about change.

Many of the investigative journalists who spoke at the *Back to the Source* conference in Sydney in September 2011 have broken stories which changed laws, forced government inquiries or Royal Commissions, or exposed corrupt practices in government or its agencies. ‘Back to the Source’, convened by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ), and co-hosted by the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), was the first national investigative conference held in Australia. The conference brought together industry professionals, journalism academics and students from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific; three groups which, as ABC managing director Mark Scott said in his opening speech, are united by ‘a shared belief in investigative journalism as a necessary condition of authentic democratic life’.

Scott got the conference off to an upbeat start, predicting that it would tear up the ‘standard script’ about journalism in our time—a despairing narrative ‘often based on a reading of balance sheets drenched in red’—and instead explore new hopes and new models for investigative journalism.

Keynote speaker Robert Rosenthal showed us what one of these new models looks like in practice. Rosenthal is director of the Center for Investigative Reporting in Berkeley, California. As a young journalist with the *New York Times*, Rosenthal literally touched history in the making: one of his first jobs was to xerox the Pentagon Papers. He went on to become executive editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and managing editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* before joining the CIR in 2008.

Rosenthal said his goal at the CIR was to ‘have fun building a new newsroom, rather than dismantling the old one’. He spoke passionately about the multi-platform approach to investigative reporting which the CIR has developed in recent years. Rosenthal likened this approach to a wheel. The ‘core story’ is the hub of the wheel, and ‘every spoke of the wheel is a different media platform’. He showed examples of recent investigations done by journalists at the CIR which have appeared simultaneously in print, online, radio and TV versions, and even as animations released on YouTube.

Rosenthal says the key to this new model is to ‘tell the story in a lucid, coherent way and to think how we can use the evolving technology and push things out on every platform’. But he also stressed that the CIR model is not just about new media technologies.

To begin with, the CIR’s work is funded by philanthropic foundations. Until very recently, philanthropic funding for quality media was almost unknown in Australia. The *Global Mail*, launched earlier this year, and funded by philanthropist Graeme Wood, is an attempt to emulate the model of not-for-profit independent journalism pioneered in the United States by organisations like the CIR and ProPublica.

The CIR’s approach is also collaborative. When their journalists begin working on a major investigation, they actively seek out media partners from NPR (National Public Radio) to local newspapers to publish and distribute the story when it’s finished. As Rosenthal stressed, this involves ‘a tremendous amount of trust’.

For many journalists, the idea of sharing a hot story with their colleagues—let alone with another media organisation—runs counter to their deepest instincts. But a number of speakers at the conference urged journalists to abandon their prejudices and get used to working collaboratively. Sue Spencer, executive producer of the ABC-TV’s highly-respected investigative current affairs programme *Four Corners*, said she believed collaboration between media organisations could lead to very powerful investigative journalism: ‘If we can pool our resources and work more collaboratively we can have really good stories which hopefully can have significant impact.’ Spencer herself championed a collaboration between *Four Corners* and *The Age* newspaper on a story about Securrency, a subsidiary of the Reserve Bank of Australia, which manufactures polymerised banknotes. The *Four Corners* program *Dirty Money*—presented by *The Age* reporter Nick McKenzie—alleged that Securrency had used a network of middlemen overseas to bribe officials of foreign governments in return for lucrative contracts. The programme, and subsequent stories in *The Age*, led directly to an investigation by the Australian Federal Police and the arrest of a number of senior executives. It was, as McKenzie’s colleague at *The Age*, Richard Baker, told the conference, ‘a classic Watergate, follow-the-money kind of story’; but the journalistic process which produced it required risk-taking, innovation, and trust.

In the following pages, as part of this special edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*, we are publishing transcripts of Robert Rosenthal’s keynote address, and of one of the conference sessions in which Sue Spencer, Richard Baker and Nick McKenzie talk about their work on the Securrency story, and Linton Besser and Dylan Welch of the *Sydney Morning Herald* describe their investigations

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of the New South Wales Crime Commission. There were many other excellent sessions at the conference; but these two transcripts give a strong sense of some of the new possibilities for investigative journalism, and of how investigative journalists practise their craft.

A number of the journalism academics who presented at the conference, like myself and my co-organiser (and co-editor of this edition of *PJR*) Wendy Bacon, continue to work as investigative journalists within universities. We hoped the conference would be the beginning of a continuing dialogue between industry and the universities—an opportunity to exchange ideas, learn from each other and be inspired. The conference certainly sparked much lively discussion and debate—and a recognition from a number of senior editors, executive producers and experienced investigative journalists who spoke or attended that universities, journalism academics and journalism students have much to offer the industry in creating new possibilities for partnership and collaboration.

Associate Professor Tom Morton

‘Back to the Source’ conference convenor

Australian Centre for Independent Journalism

Reference

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